

The Stovemakers

ALEXANDER TVARDOVSKY

THAT stovemakers were very unusual people and the trade of the stovemaker a very unusual trade, with a touch of mystery, even of magic about it, I had known ever since I was a boy — not so much from personal experience, it is true, as from the numberless stories, legends and tales I had heard about stoves and stovemakers.

In the place where I was born and grew up was a stovemaker of great renown called Mishechka. We called him by his nickname despite his advanced age, perhaps because he was so small ; though it was common with us to call grown-ups and even old men by this particular diminutive form — Mishechka for Mikhail, Grishechka for Grigory, and so on.

Mishechka was famous, among other things, for his habit of eating clay. This I had seen him do with my own eyes, when he relaid the burnt-out bottom of our own stove at home. After he had carefully mixed the clay with warm water and kneaded it with his feet till it glistened like butter, he took a good-sized lump on his finger, tucked it away in his cheek, chewed it and swallowed it,

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smiling as he did so, very much like a conjurer who wants to show that his trick isn't difficult to him in the least. I remember how Mishechka crawled inside our stove and, sitting under its low vault, hacked out the old floor bricks between his parted legs with a special stovemaker's hammer. How he managed to get there — he may have been small but he was not a baby — I simply couldn't understand. One winter when I had a cold, my grandmother had tried to give me a heat cure in this stove, but it was so cramped, hot and frightening inside that I yelled at the top of my voice and struggled out so violently that I nearly fell off the ledge on to the floor.

I realize now that the idea of Mishechka's innocent trick of eating clay in public was to stress his exceptional professional qualifications. It was as if he were saying : 'Look, it's not everyone can do this, and it's not everyone can build a stove.'

But Mishechka, like the good fairy in the story, was kind and harmless, and never used the opportunities inherent in his trade for doing people a bad turn. Not like some other stovemakers, who, if they took a dislike to a customer for some reason, could cause him a great deal of worry and trouble. One favourite trick was to fix the neck of a broken bottle somewhere inside the chimney so that the stove would sing in all manner of dismal voices, foretelling ill luck and disaster for the house and its occupants. Or a brick might be hung up in a

certain spot on a piece of string only strong enough to last the first trial heating. All would go nicely then until the second or third day, when the string burned through, causing the brick to fall and block the chimney : after which the stove would not light at all, and there was no way of finding out what was wrong except by pulling it to pieces and building it all over again. There were other tricks of much the same sort. Besides, even stoves of the same design differed from one another in the way they warmed up, or threw out their heat, or in their length of life.

So by tradition the people in our parts stood somewhat in awe of stovemakers and went out of their way to please them. You must also take into account what a large place, both literally and figuratively, the stove used to occupy in the old peasant home. It was not only a source of warmth, not only a kitchen in itself : it was a bakery, a drying cupboard, a bath-house, a laundry, and finally the cosy nook for a well-earned rest after a long day's work in the cold, after a journey, or simply when you needed to cure a variety of aches and pains. To put the thing in a nutshell, no stove means no home. This I have learned by experience, and of late have thought so much and so deeply about stoves and stovemakers that I could probably write a thesis on the subject.

I had been given a place to live just across the road from the school. It was a peasant's cottage

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attached to two similar ones in which other teachers were housed. My cottage was divided into two rooms, with the partition in the middle of a big two-piece stove which jutted out into the front room as a cooking range, and into the back one as a huge Dutch-type stove. And it was this stove which for a long time caused me great vexation and misery, verging at times on utter despair. In class, during lessons, at any occupation, in any place, in public or in private, I had only to think of the house I lived in, and the stove in this house, to feel that my thoughts were getting muddled, that I couldn't concentrate, and that I was turning into an embittered and unhappy man.

It was very difficult, almost impossible, to get that stove going. The range could be heated after a fashion, though for me, who was for the time being without my family, the range was not of much importance. But so soon as we ventured to light the Dutch stove to heat the back room, where I worked and slept, we had to open the windows and doors to let out the smoke which filled the whole house. When I first saw the caretaker struggling with it in vain, I tried to light the stove myself; but the same thing happened to me. Smoke poured out of the door, out of the fire-box, seeped through hidden chinks round the chimney and even found its way out of the rings of the cooking range in the front room. It couldn't have smoked worse if I had forgotten to open the flue.

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Many were the devices we tried in the hope of lighting this stove, drawing on the whole wealth of experience and resource of people who had to deal with ten or more school stoves that were constantly in use.

The caretaker Ivanovna and her husband, Fyodor Matveyev, a cripple, were experts at the job. Each had his own method or system, quite different from the other's but equally efficient. Briefly, the difference between them could be stated as follows. Ivanovna started with fire, and Fyodor with wood. I learned both these methods thoroughly. Ivanovna, a nimble, competent little woman, would set a curled bit of birchbark, a handful of shavings, a few scraps of newspaper or wood chips in an otherwise empty stove, set light to them, and by gradually adding handfuls of chips and shavings would build up a strong lively flame on which the logs could be piled until there was no room for another.

Fyodor, on the other hand — mainly, I suppose, because he was a cripple and could not move about quickly — preferred to build the wood up first in the shape of a cage or a tent, carefully selecting the pieces of wood and arranging them as if he were solving some complex problem of design. And only when he had done this would he set fire to his structure with birchbark, shavings or scraps of paper. The result was just as good as his wife's. The stove would get going quickly, the wood would burn evenly, there would never be any fumes, and

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the stove never cooled before it should. My stove, however, gave equally bad results no matter what method I used.

I began to think quite seriously that some trick, like the ones played in the old days, had gone into the making of it.

In my misfortune, I gradually discovered the whole history of this unlucky stove. It turned out that no one wanted to live in my cottage because of it. The history teacher, I was told, had put up with it for a while, then run away. In the summer Ksenia Arkadievna, the maths teacher, had lived there while the next-door house was being done up, but in the autumn she moved out even before the decorators were finished.

The stove had been built originally by German prisoners of war, after which it had twice been rebuilt by various unknown stovemakers, yet always with the same ill luck. It was a ticklish matter for me to propose to the headmaster that it should be rebuilt once more. It would, of course, have to be done eventually : only I didn't want the fourth attempt to be a failure.

I had been told that there was one man in the district, a certain Yegor Yakovlevich, who could build a stove guaranteed to work ; but that lately he had been very unwilling to take on such jobs. He had his railwayman's pension to live on, a house and garden of his own, and he just wasn't interested. We sent him a note by his grandson in the fourth

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form. There was no answer. Fyodor went to see him once, and another time met him in the village. But it was always the same story : either he was ill, or else he had taken on a job somewhere else and couldn't promise anything for the future.

Still, the matter couldn't be put off any longer. The November holiday was over, winter was coming on. Now I could get to sleep in my room only because I was used to sleeping in the trenches ; and I had to correct my pupils' dictations and compositions at school, in the teachers' common room, when everyone else had gone home. On top of everything, I was very much afraid that my wife Lolya, in spite of all my stern warnings, might suddenly descend on me with our five-months-old son before I could get the place fit to live in.

The whole wretched business quite wore me out. It was not only the stove that got on my nerves, but all the talk and speculation about it which went on among the other members of the staff, the headmaster, the caretakers, even, I was sure, the pupils as well, for children always know all about their teachers' private lives. Even to-day, when the whole ridiculous story of the stove is over and done with, I find it hard to make light of it in the telling : I feel I discuss it with a seriousness it scarcely deserves. But just ask anybody, particularly a housewife who has to make do with stove heating, how much a bad stove means to her in her everyday life, what an effect it has on her temper, on her

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work. She will tell you that a bad stove can turn you grey before your time. Besides, I had to think of all this stove-trouble from the point of view of Lolya, a town-bred woman, and a young mother too, who would have to live with me in this house.

One morning I was awakened earlier than usual by the reflected shine of snow which had fallen overnight, and a clear, simple and hopeful solution occurred to me.

I remembered the local military commandant's office and the major I had talked to there when I called to register as an officer of the Reserve. What a fool I was not to have thought of it before ! I would go and ask him to help me. All he had to do was to look up his files of people liable for service, find someone who had his name down as a stove-maker, and that would be the man for me.

The major received me in his tiny cubby-hole of an office divided by a boarded partition from the rest of the big, log-walled room.

He had a plain worried face, with wrinkles that folded up under his thick dark hair, making his forehead low and narrow and giving him a very fierce expression. But now that face lengthened with sympathetic understanding.

'Well, that's not so easy,' he began, lighting a cigarette, 'it's not a very common trade. It would be different if you wanted a cobbler or a smith. But a stovemaker. . . .' Suddenly he smiled, exposing his big nicotine-stained teeth and broad upper gum.

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'Every soldier is his own stovemaker. I'll have a look.'

It turned out that there were some stovemakers, only one had lost an arm, another lived too far away, a third was chairman of a big collective farm (so there was no point in going to him), and the last one had only been born in 1926. The major himself said a stovemaker ought to be older than that. There were other candidates also whom we rejected for one reason or another.

'I'll tell you what to do,' the major said, after he had heard all about my troubles. 'You go and see that miracle-worker, Yegor Yakovlevich, yourself. They tell me he's a very fine craftsman. Go and talk to him. And if it doesn't work, come back here and we'll think up something.' Again he gave me that big toothy smile of his, furtively covering his mouth with his hand, as people who have lost a front tooth do when they smile, particularly women.

This last suggestion of his, for all the sympathy he had shown, seemed to me nothing more than ordinary non-committal politeness.

Next day I set off along the muddy verge of the main road through the village to see Yegor Yakovlevich. The snow had fallen on unfrozen earth; there was nothing left of it except in the gardens and yards where nobody walked.

It was early. I was glad there were so few people about. I didn't want anyone to see me and know where I was going. I felt as though I were

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wearing boots too tight for me, that they were pinching me, and that though I tried to hide the fact, everyone knew about it and was sorry for me — sorry, but at the same time a little amused. If there is anything I dislike it's being the object of pitying amusement. I think I have been much more sensitive about it since I became a married man, the head of a family ; I shouldn't really have cared at all had I been a bachelor.

But now I walked along feeling that the old woman in rubber boots by the well, the girl with a loaf of bread under her arm and chewing a bit of it, two little boys who greeted me at the cross-roads, all these knew not only where I was going, but also that I had not long been married, that I was inexperienced and lacked confidence in arranging my domestic affairs. Perhaps they even knew that my mother-in-law, who was a doctor in the town, a very handsome woman by no means old, and still rather unwilling to acknowledge the fact that she was a grandmother, had no very great respect for me ; and that I was either shy of, or afraid of, her. And that when we lived in her flat Lolya and I and the baby had occupied the smaller room, while she had the big separate room all to herself.

I had little faith in the success of my mission, since I already had a picture in my mind of Yegor Yakovlevich as an old man with many ailments and little incentive to earn money. There is nothing

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worse than asking someone to do something he doesn't want to do, or doesn't need to do.

I turned off down a sloping, slippery path along a fence one had to cling to for safety and, entering by a gate, went up to Yegor Yakovlevich's glassed-in veranda.

The veranda door was locked. Looking in, I saw that the floor was strewn with cabbages, beet and carrots. A long severe face with a straggling beard appeared at one of the windows, a hand signalled to me that the entrance was on the other side.

I went round the house, climbed a muddy flight of steps and, for propriety's sake, knocked at a heavy door padded with rags.

'Pull it !' a hoarse yet powerful voice called from within. 'Pull it !'

I went into a large kitchen with two windows. At a table by the right-hand window sat an old man — not really old but of a pretty good age, with a long, stern, rather sallow and unhealthy face, and a wispy beard that had once been ginger but was now a brownish grey. On the table were a samovar, the remains of a meal (yesterday's presumably), and an empty vodka bottle. The man was calmly, and with what seemed to me deliberate disregard of my presence, slicing an apple into a glass of tea. So this was Yegor Yakovlevich.

'Can't do it,' he said briefly and with a kind of cold sadness, almost before I had explained what I had come about.

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I was standing on the doorstep. I could either take a chair at the table, if he offered it, or I could sit down on a wooden bench by the door, which was cluttered with boxes, felt boots, flower-pots and other odds and ends. I could take a seat there without invitation, although conversation would be difficult, like trying to talk to someone across a street.

Nevertheless, I sat down on the bench and again began expounding my request, trying, of course, to put in a word here and there about his great reputation as a stovemaker. I attempted to present my troubles with the stove in a humorous light, putting all the emphasis on my own helplessness and inexperience in such matters.

But he treated all this as something in the nature of things, and of no interest whatsoever. Though he didn't interrupt me, the effect was as if he had said: 'You can go on talking just as long as you like, it's all the same to me, while I'm having my tea.' He didn't even look at me. He was more occupied with looking out of the window at the muddy uninviting street, at the bushes in his garden and the wet discomfort of the yard, all of which can be a pleasant enough sight when you are sitting in your favourite corner drinking tea in the warmth of a good reliable stove. Obviously he knew the value of his old man's morning hour for tea, a smoke, leisurely, untroubled contemplation.

Soon I began to feel that the kitchen was very

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much too hot. 'Advertisement,' I thought, and added to my discourse yet another servile compliment about how warm and nice it was to come in out of the cold into such a well-heated house.

'No, I won't take it on,' he interrupted me again, moving aside his glass and saucer and proceeding to smoke.

'But Yegor Yakovlevich !'

'Yegor Yakovlevich, Yegor Yakovlevich,' he mimicked me idly, pointedly ignoring the flattery implied in my zealous use of his name and patronymic. 'I've told you I can't do it. And that's that.'

It would be true to say that no district or even regional inspector of education, or any other highly placed official with secretaries, telephones and a queue of people waiting to see him, could have spoken to me with such aloofness and languid arrogance. No matter how severe and remote, he would have had to give some sort of explanation as to why he was unable to satisfy my request.

'Why not, Yegor Yakovlevich ?'

'Because,' he replied in the same melancholy and impressive tone, 'there's only one Yegor Yakovlevich and too many people wanting him to do things. I've only got two hands, you know.' He held out his big bony hands, the wrists protruding from the short sleeves of his much-washed vest, and tapped his lofty forehead with his finger. 'Two hands and one head, that's all.'

These gestures were of an explanatory nature,

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as though specially adapted to the level of my intelligence, and they showed that Yegor Yakovlevich was far from underestimating his own importance.

‘But, Yegor Yakovlevich,’ I ventured, ‘if it’s the fee you’re worried about, for my part I’m quite willing. . . .’

‘The fee’s got nothing to do with it!’ He gave a careless wave of his big heavy hand. ‘Everyone knows how much I charge. What I’m saying is, I won’t take it on. Do it for one person and somebody else will come asking. So it’s better not to do it for anyone, then nobody will feel hard done by. There was a man here yesterday’ — he indicated the vodka bottle with the cigarette in his left hand — ‘tried everything to persuade me. . . .’

‘But perhaps you could, Yegor Yakovlevich?’

‘I’ve told you already’ — again he lifted that heavy-boned hand to the empty bottle, almost touching it with his little finger — ‘there was a man here yesterday. . . .’

He indicated this empty bottle with such conviction, as evidence of some suppliant visitor, that I found myself regarding it almost as a living person who, like myself, was also in dire need of Yegor Yakovlevich’s good-will.

Then I realized a simple fact which should have occurred to me at the outset.

‘Well, what about it, Yegor Yakovlevich?’ I said resolutely, approaching the table, ‘Suppose we make

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a day of it ? . . .' I lifted the bottle gently to make my meaning clear.

Yegor Yakovlevich looked up at me, his light-blue eyes slightly bloodshot with age. The shadow of a smile appeared on his pale lips.

'I don't use it of a morning.' In the tone of this refusal there was not only aloofness but didactic disapproval. 'I never use it of a morning,' he repeated even more firmly, and leaned on the table to get up, evidently wishing to show that the audience was over. 'Of course, there was a man here yesterday. . . .'

So I decided that to him I was simply 'a man', like the one who stood on the table between us in the shape of the empty bottle. There were many of us and only one Yegor Yakovlevich.

He saw me into the porch and, standing at the open door, for some reason made a parting remark which contained a touch of sympathy for my disappointment. 'If I happen to be passing I may drop in.'

'Please do,' I responded mechanically, though by now I couldn't see why in the world he should do so.

I went away in the very depths of despair. I felt as if I had tried to do something low and mean and had been caught in the act. Why had I gone to this man, begging and wheedling at the expense of my dignity? Let others do that, it was not my job. But what was I to do? Wait until the headmaster

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'took the matter up personally,' until one of the stovemakers who were supposed to be doing something at the station had time for me, until my wife, after some disagreement with her mother, decided it would be better to live in a barn than without her husband, and arrived before anything was ready ?

The more I thought about the situation the more depressed I grew. Since I could think of no one to put the blame on I began to grumble about bad management in general.

Here we were, building unique blast-furnaces out of hundreds of different kinds of brick, erecting buildings which would stand for centuries as memorials to our life and work on earth, examples to posterity of the greatness of our interests and aspirations : but as for building a stove — an ordinary stove like the ones they must have had way back in the days of Kiev Rus, a simple heating installation for the home of a working intellectual, a teacher of Russian language and literature—that was an impossible feat !

As I walked home I built up an entirely irrefutable argument to the effect that such a situation was not merely intolerable, but abnormal. The phrases came into my head one after another, lyrically impassioned, bitterly sarcastic, full of conviction, truth and clarity. Soon I was no longer telling myself these things. I was composing a speech which I was to deliver to a large audience somewhere, or in an interview with some very

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highly placed personage. Or it may have been an article for the press, fervently and honestly drawing attention to the problem of providing for the needs of the rural intelligentsia. And I didn't stop there. I began to touch on the existing forms and methods of instruction, and so on and so forth. Little by little, without realizing it, I got away from my stove.

I felt a tremendous desire to talk to someone about all these things, to share my penetrating observations and unanswerable arguments, to recite aloud the purple passages of my mental tirade, throwing in a quotation here and there as if it had occurred to me on the spur of the moment.

When I went to see the major, I wasn't even considering his promise to 'think up something' about the stove. He lived not far from his office in a semi-detached wooden house with a porch exactly similar to the one next door.

I was told he had already gone off to work, so it was there I found him, in his quiet little office. He rose to meet me, quickly closing a thick notebook and pushing it away into his desk. The excitement on my face, produced by physical and mental exertion, must have made him think I had been successful.

'Well, how's it going?'

I told him of my visit. Everything now struck me as rather funny; much to my own surprise I found myself giving a humorous description of Yegor Yakovlevich and the self-important air he

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had assumed as he sat there drinking tea and turning down my request. I even imitated his gesture at the bottle: 'There was a man here yesterday. . . .' We enjoyed the joke together.

'Well,' said the major, 'it looks as if I'll have to build you a stove myself.'

'How do you mean?'

'Out of bricks!' He laughed, showing his big teeth and lifting his hand to his mouth.

It was only then that I noticed something likeable and rather touching about that smile of his. It immediately transformed his gloomy, worried face.

'You mean you want to remake the stove yourself?'

'Yes, myself. I'd give the job to my assistant but he couldn't do it.' The major seemed to find a certain satisfaction in observing my confusion. 'To-morrow's Saturday, isn't it? We'll start to-morrow evening then.'

It was all quite simple, yet at the same time a little embarrassing. After all, the major was in a sense my commanding officer, and it was hardly the thing for him to hire himself out to me as a stove-maker.

'Don't you trust me? You've been to my house, haven't you? Didn't you see the stove? Made it myself. The wife likes it.'

'I do, of course, I'm very grateful. But then, we'll have to reach some sort of agreement.'

'About my fee?' he prompted me with a cheerful

readiness. 'Don't worry, we'll strike a bargain, all right.'

'But hadn't we better. . . .'

'We'd better drop the subject. A fine thing that'd be — the district military commandant supplementing his salary by building stoves on the quiet! I'd like to know what headquarters would say if they heard about that!'

'But suppose they get to hear about you making stoves?'

'Let them. That's nobody's business but my own. I made this myself, too.' He passed his hand over his tunic and trousers. 'I get the cloth and make it up myself. I make all my children's outdoor clothes too. I could do the same for you.'

The following evening he arrived at my place with a bundle under his arm. It contained an old pair of summer uniform trousers and a tunic, also a stovemaker's hammer, a metal rule, a coil of wire, and some lengths of string.

He inspected the stove and the cooking-range from all angles, then placed a chair in the middle of the room facing the stove, sat down and lighted a cigarette while he contemplated it.

'Hm . . . ' he said after a time.

'What did you say?'

'Nothing. It'll make a lot of mess.'

'That doesn't matter. The caretaker will clean up afterwards.'

'Have you got any wood?' he asked.

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‘Yes. What for?’

‘To light it with.’

‘When you’ve built the new stove, you mean?’

‘No, first of all we’ll try to light this one.’

I thought he must be joking, or else had forgotten all I had told him about my stove.

‘But you’ll only smoke the place out! Don’t you believe me?’

‘Of course I do. But we’ve got to light it all the same. Where’s the wood?’

There was some wood in the corridor, including several charred logs which had been in the stove already.

The major stripped off his tunic and set about the job with such assurance that I began to wonder whether Ivanovna and I had perhaps overlooked something responsible for our failure in the past. Now the major would light the stove and it would turn out to be quite all right. That would be excellent; but what a fool I should look after all the fuss I’d made!

To my great relief the stove smoked just as much as it had when lighted by Ivanovna, Fyodor or myself.

‘No, Comrade Major,’ I said.

‘What do you mean “no”?’

‘It won’t burn.’

‘All the better. That’s just what we want!’ he said with a laugh. ‘What we want to know is why it doesn’t burn.’

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The kindling had burnt up ; the thicker wood had merely blackened without even catching ; the place was full of smoke as usual. The major went outside to look at the chimney. I went out too. It was still light.

How many times, after lighting the stove, had I run outside to see if a wisp of smoke was coming from the chimney ! It took me back to my childhood. I remembered how, as a boy, I sometimes used to stare very hard at the top of our chimney, perhaps just to see whether they had lighted the samovar at home, and the air would seem to quiver above the chimney but no smoke would appear.

The major went back into the house, took a length of string with a weight tied to the end of it and climbed the step-ladder on to the roof. I watched him lower the weight down the chimney and start fishing with it. It was just like someone trying to hook a lost pail out of a well.

Just then a tall man in a half-length coat with a rusty-looking fur collar and diagonal pockets on the chest stopped in the road and, holding his left hand to the peak of his cap, stared up at our roof. In his right hand he carried a light stick. When the major pulled his string out of the chimney and climbed down the roof, the man approached us. I saw that it was Yegor Yakovlevich. He nodded to me and, addressing the major, asked :

‘Well, how goes it ?’

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‘God knows. There doesn’t seem to be anything in the chimney but it won’t burn.’

One might have thought they had known each other for a long time and were both working on this troublesome stove together. We went into the house, which still reeked of smoke, and the major and Yegor Yakovlevich began talking about the stove. They kept referring to ‘him’, meaning the unknown craftsman who had built it in the first place.

‘Deserves a good hiding for a job like this,’ the major suggested with gloomy conviction.

But the old stovemaker retorted pacifically, ‘A hiding wouldn’t do him any good. The point is he wasn’t a stovemaker at all, must have been a cobbler or something. Linking up two chimneys, one from the range and the other from the stove, was a bit too much for his understanding.’ While he spoke, Yegor Yakovlevich drew his stick round the stove like a pointer, tapping it and leaving marks on the bricks. ‘Yes, just a cobbler, that’s what he was.’

He said this as though comparing the trade of cobbler with something immeasurably more complex, with art or poetry, for instance.

The two stovemakers lighted cigarettes and went on discussing the problem at length. They were like doctors discussing a patient, quite unconcerned by the presence of friends or relatives, assuming these understood only half of their terminology,

their unfinished phrases, their shoulder-shrugging, their mysterious gestures.

‘If you don’t know how to do a thing, don’t take it on,’ Yegor Yakovlevich concluded, not without an allusion, so it seemed to me, to present company.

The major did not take offence. ‘I’m no stove-maker,’ he said, ‘I had to have a stove for my own place, so I made one. But when a man’s in a jam like this,’ he nodded at me, ‘someone ought to help him, don’t you think?’

‘Of course they should,’ said Yegor Yakovlevich, gratified at the major’s modesty. ‘But help him so that he won’t have to ask for help any more.’

‘Yegor Yakovlevich!’ I suddenly felt a fresh surge of hope. ‘Yegor Yakovlevich, that’s quite true. What about it?’

And the major backed me up in the best possible fashion :

‘I’d be your assistant, Yegor Yakovlevich. It would do me lots of good to work under a master of the trade like you, really it would!’ His mouth split open in that toothy smile and he covered it with the hand in which he held his cigarette. It is usually the plain folk who in the end find their way unerringly to the hearts of the most eccentric and aloof.

‘Well, what am I to do with you? Assistance must be rendered,’ said the stovemaker, and that ‘assistance must be rendered’ sounded just like the resolutions which came down to us from district and

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regional headquarters : 'assistance must be rendered' in this sphere or that.

Yegor Yakovlevich sat down on the chair in front of the stove just as the major had sat before him. He stared at it, muttering to himself, 'Assistance. Assistance must be rendered. . . .' With a sweep of his stick first in the direction of the major, then at the stove, he said with a kind of deliberate drawl : 'Well, my friend, for to-morrow I want you to pull this stove down and pile the bricks neatly, so none of them get broken. Understand ?'

I noticed that he addressed the major familiarly, as if he already considered him his subordinate, although he must have noticed the major's tunic with its badges of rank hanging on the back of the chair ; and in this, too, he was just like any of our district or regional chiefs.

The major said he would go up on the roof straight away. I, of course, expressed my readiness to help him, but Yegor Yakovlevich said there was no need.

'The stack's got nothing to do with it, the old one will do for us, only it's got to be propped up.'

Neither I nor the major knew how chimney-stacks were propped up. So Yegor Yakovlevich gripped his stick at each end and explained the task in a rough-and-ready manner, again addressing his remarks to the major only :

'Take a couple of good beams, not less than five centimetres thick. Find the shoulders of the stack

in the attic and get those beams propped under them. . . . You can prop up a whole stove like that if necessary. What would you do if you had to pull down a stove on the ground floor and there was another one on top of it upstairs? Pull down both of them just for the sake of one? That won't do!'

Even from this first piece of practical instruction I could see that the old man had not assumed his position of seniority without reason. Before I had time to raise the question of payment he had departed with a nod, leaving rather a mess on the floor from his felt boots and his home-made galoshes cut out of the inner tube of a motor tyre.

By the evening the major and I had pulled down the stove, leaving the range untouched and propping up the stack as instructed. I had been afraid this propping up might lead to some disaster, but the major coped with the task with a confidence which belied his inexperience. So far as I could see, he was one of those excellent fellows you often find in the army, who will tackle any job fearlessly, basing themselves on the well-known proposition that a man can do anything if he tries.

He made the props we needed out of a sixty-millimetre plank, by splitting it very neatly down the middle with an axe, which he then used like a plane to smooth down the two halves. With practised ease he freed the stove doors and dampers from the bricks and the wire loops holding them in place. It was easy and pleasant to work with him: he

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wasn't overbearing with his superior skill, never lost his temper, and his occasional jokes about my lack of talent were good-natured. We finished up by knocking together a box for the clay and mixing clay and sand so that everything should be handy for work. While we were changing our clothes, the kettle boiled.

'I could do with some tea,' the major agreed simply, and we sat down together in the front kitchen, where it was cleaner. Over tea and cigarettes we got talking.

The major looked through my books, which I had brought in from the other room to save them from the dust, and singling out a tattered volume of Nekrasov, observed that it needed re-binding. When I said it would be a difficult job to find a binder round here, he volunteered to re-bind it himself and even to teach me how to do it. Of course it wouldn't be the same without a proper cutting press, he said, but the book would keep better. He loved books with that gentle respect and care one finds only among the humblest readers. He went all through my tiny library volume by volume, paying most attention to the poetry. I said he must be fond of poetry, a thing which was not so common among people who didn't, so to speak, specialize in literature. He smiled shyly, yet with a certain defiance emphasized by the joking arrogance in his tone. He said, 'I write poetry myself. Publish it, too!'

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‘That’s splendid,’ I said. Then, not knowing what else to say : ‘Do you use a pseudonym, if you don’t mind my asking ? I don’t think I have met your name in the press.’

‘No, I use my own name. But my stuff isn’t published very often. Besides, it only appears in the regional newspaper and in *Soviet Soldier*. You don’t get those round here.’

Having said this he seemed to grow a little sad, which prompted me to show a greater interest in his poetry. I asked him to show me some of it one day. He consented at once, and began reciting it to me by heart.

Here I should mention that I don’t refer to the major by name because his poems really are printed and somebody might find out that he and the hero of my story are one and the same person. And I shouldn’t like that to happen at all, for I am describing him just as he is in life. I tried to invent a name for him in this story but there was something distasteful about it ; I couldn’t find anything that would suit him, so I have decided to leave him simply as ‘the major’.

The major recited several of his poems. I don’t remember them ; they were like so many other poems that appear in the papers about the virgin lands, soldiers’ heroism, the peace movement, hydro-power stations, dams, girls, little children growing up to live in the age of communism, and, of course, poems about poetry. The resemblance

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was due not merely to an inadvertent trick of imitation, which a poet would wish to avoid ; it seemed as if every verse had been written for the express purpose of sounding like other people's, to conform to some ideal of what proper poetry should be. I couldn't tell him this : I felt too well disposed towards him on account of his kindness, his comradely sympathy, his jack-of-all-trades ability and his quite unaffected modesty. I said something about a rather weak rhyme ; it was quite an insignificant remark.

'No,' he replied quietly, 'it's not a matter of rhyme. . . .' Arranging the books in a neat pile on the edge of the table, he repeated thoughtfully : 'It's not the rhyming which bothers me. . . .' The reply left something sadly unstated ; perhaps he himself knew something about his poems which I had not mentioned and, so it seemed to him, had failed to understand. Suddenly he began talking as if he were justifying himself, trying to answer in advance someone's objections to his poetry :

'You know, I'm not such a fool as to think this has any real merit. But I'm not afraid of work, I'm as stubborn as a mule, I can go without food or sleep to do something I want to do. I started writing when I was at the war, not while in action, of course, but during my hospital spells. A wound for me meant a new book of poems — a sort of creative leave.' He laughed at his own joke and went on, 'I was lucky. I got wounded four times,

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not exactly lightly, but not very seriously, just about right for six weeks away from the front. Just enough time to have a good read and a scribble and then back to the front. And my luck held out. The job I've got now gives me a clear day off once a week. Then there are the evenings and nights. Frankly speaking, I just can't drop it, I must master a thing once I've started it. It's like this stove business. Do you think I ever learned to be a stove-maker, ever took a course in it? I had to build a stove, there was no one to do it for me, and, quite frankly, I couldn't have paid him if there had been — I have a family of six, you know. So what did I do? I made it twice. The first time I just did it roughly, heated it up, found out where the secret lay, took it to pieces again like we did this one — that one wasn't dry, of course — and then made a fairly good job of it. Yegor Yakovlevich might find something wrong with it, but it works.' Again he gave a laugh, but rather an ambiguous one: there was a touch of bravado in it, yet at the same time he was quite ready to dismiss the whole thing merely as an amusement.

In the course of our talk it turned out that we had been on neighbouring fronts. Trifling though it was, this fact of being neighbours in the past brought us closer together, rather like two men attracted to each other by the equally trifling fact of their coming from the same place. I walked home with him a little of the way, then came back

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and was a long time going to sleep in my cold and dusty room with its dismantled stove. It occurred to me that this pleasant man, busy with his army work and burdened with a large family, ought not to wear himself out trying to write poetry. It was clear to me that his verses were not really an expression of a deep inner need to say something which could only be said in verse. To write about the war as he did, he need never have spent four years at the front and been wounded four times. In his verses about the children of socialism there wasn't a trace of the author — a father of six children ; in the poem about the virgin lands the only thing I could remember was the line : ' Virgin soil must yield to toil ' ; and finally, even in the poems about poetry, there was nothing but a repetition of the axiom that poetry is needed in battle and labour.

Perhaps he wrote all this because he knew he had the ability to master any new craft, not only without special training, but even without any special inclination. Yet it wasn't that ; the urge to write must have had a very strong hold over him. One thing was certain : much disappointment and bitterness awaited him on the path he had chosen.

I was awakened by a tap at the window above my head — a gentle but insistent tapping of a stick. It was Yegor Yakovlevich. I switched on the light — for it was still pitch dark — and let him in. He was wearing the same short coat with the fur collar

and carrying the same pointer-like stick as before. He had no tools or overalls with him. While I dressed and tidied up, he smoked and coughed, blew his nose and spat, and examined everything we had left in readiness for the job.

‘Having a good rest, eh? A good rest!’ he repeated between his coughing and nose-blowing.

He was obviously very pleased that he had caught me in bed and had arrived before the major. But the major did not keep the old man waiting more than ten minutes.

‘To-day’s a day off, after all,’ he apologized with a smile, as he unwrapped his overalls.

‘For some people it’s a day off, but for you and me it’s a working day,’ the old man responded coldly, and his manner of address was formal, for the major was still in his army tunic with his badges of rank on the shoulder-straps. ‘It’s a pity you didn’t wet the clay overnight. We’ll have a lot more mixing to do now. Wouldn’t do any harm to have some warm water either. Not because we’re afraid of spoiling our hands but to make the mixture stick better.’ He always called the mess of clay and sand the ‘mixture’, as though ranking it with cement. Grunting, he squatted down over the foundation of the ruined stove, measured it up with his stick and said :

‘Four by four — that’ll be quite enough.’

‘Here you are, Yegor Yakovlevich,’ the major said, offering him a folding rule.

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The old man waved his stick.

‘I’ve got all the measurements we need here. If you don’t trust me you can measure it again yourself.’

But no one did measure it again. It was decided that the foundation of the stove was to be four bricks long and four bricks wide. Yegor Yakovlevich transferred his stick to his left hand, with his right quickly arranged the bricks in a square, then stood up and pointed at them with his stick :

‘That’s the way you will lay them.’ He scooped a lump of the clay the major and I had mixed out of the box, squeezed it in his hand, frowned, and tossed it back. ‘A bit more sand. No, not that much ! I said a bit. That’s enough. Now mix it up well.’

We started work ; right from the beginning each of us found his own place. I mixed the clay and carried the bricks, the major did the brick-laying, and Yegor Yakovlevich supervised everything, using his stick as a pointer, now sitting down, now standing up, and coughing and smoking all the time. Sometimes he seemed to forget the stove and plunged into a detailed, edifying discourse on the virtues of early rising, on the necessity of strict abstention from alcohol before work, on his cough, which was particularly troublesome first thing in the morning, and on the qualities of various kinds of bricks and many other materials. But I noticed that all the time he kept a vigilant eye on the work

so that not a single brick went into place without close inspection and sometimes even an apparently casual tap from his stick. Yegor Yakovlevich was still wearing his warm coat, but the major and I, though we were wearing only our old tunics, were already warm from the work and mopping our brows and noses on our sleeves, for our hands were smeared with clay. Yegor Yakovlevich noticed this and did not miss the opportunity of giving us a little professional instruction on the matter.

‘Stop for a breather, mate. Have a smoke,’ he said. With crafty generosity he offered the major his packet of cigarettes. The major straightened up and spread his arms helplessly. ‘Aha ! Nothing to take it with, eh ? Got to go and wash your hands first ? Is that it ? Well, that shows you’re not a stovemaker yet.’ He pushed a cigarette into the major’s mouth, lighted it for him and went on : ‘Why should I have both hands in the mixture ? No, I only need one there, the right hand, and my left ought to be in the dry. Look.’ He pushed the major away with his stick, put it aside and, deftly folding back his sleeves, took a brick in his left hand, dipped his right in the pail of water, then scooped up a small lump of clay. ‘Look ! I place the brick with the left hand, then put the clay on and smooth it out with the right. See ?’ He quickly laid a row of bricks and, though it made him slightly out of breath, it was obvious that he used a lot less energy in doing so than the major. ‘Your left hand

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should always be in the dry. And it's not just a matter of being able to light up for a smoke and blow your nose without any trouble, it makes the work cleaner too. You want a nail — here's your nail, you want your glasses or anything else, you want to button something or unbutton it — it's easy.' He showed us how he could do all these things with his left hand. 'But your way, you're stuck, like a scarecrow on a cabbage patch.'

At this the stovemaker smiled, very pleased with his lesson and prepared to allow his final words to be taken as a joke. I was very pleased with the major : far from taking offence, he watched the demonstration with a delighted smile, covering his mouth with his hand, which he kept at a distance so as not to smudge himself.

He made an attempt to adopt Yegor Yakovlevich's method, but soon found it necessary to transfer a brick from left hand to right, and had to give in.

'No, Yegor Yakovlevich, you'll have to let me do it my own way.'

'Carry on, carry on,' the old man agreed, 'it doesn't come all at once. I've known plenty of stovemakers, quite good ones too, who worked like you all their lives.'

I am sure he would have been displeased and disappointed if the major had managed to acquire his style straight away. Perhaps the major realized this and did not try very hard. Then Yegor Yakovlevich, who was evidently in the mood for teaching

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us, placed two bricks edge to edge, and, holding his hand over them as if to pick them up, suggested to the major, 'There, pick them up with one hand.'

But the major burst out laughing and wagged his finger.

'Aha, that's an old trick, I know that one!'

'You do, do you? Well, I should think so too. Some can't do it, you know. I've had them betting a bottle of vodka on it before now.'

The trick, as they showed me, was to slip your index finger unnoticed between the bricks; then you could pick them up and move them about without difficulty.

The mention of vodka reminded me of breakfast, the more so since it was already quite light and nearly nine o'clock. I told them I should have to go out for a while and went off to the station, where I bought bread, sausage, one or two tins, and a bottle of vodka at a stall. On the way back I called on Ivanovna, who gave me a whole bowl of salted cucumbers, which in the fresh air smelled appetizingly of garlic and fennel. I was glad of the chance to stretch my legs and my back, which was already aching with the work, and I imagined the major would take a rest while I was away. But when I got back I saw that the work had gone on without a break and the new stove had risen to the height of the range; the doors had already been wired in, and Yegor Yakovlevich, no longer in his coat, but wearing a woollen jersey, was laying the first arch

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of the vault, while the major had taken my place and was handing him the bricks. They worked well together, though the major could scarcely keep up with the old man's cracking pace. And they were still arguing.

'A man ought to have only one talent,' Yegor Yakovlevich was saying. True to his maxim, his left hand was still 'in the dry'.

His body in the tight jersey seemed almost puny in comparison with the big, long, heavy-wristed arms that reached out like the claws of a crayfish. The argument must have developed out of what they had been talking about before I left — about craftsmanship and style of work, but by this time it had gone far beyond its original boundaries.

'Only one talent. And if you haven't got a talent for a thing, don't go in for it. Don't botch. That's what I always say, and you bear it in mind.'

'But why only one?' the major argued calmly and with a touch of superiority. 'What about the Renaissance? Leonardo da Vinci?'

Obviously it was the first time Yegor Yakovlevich had heard these names in his life. He was annoyed at his own ignorance, but he was not going to give way.

'That we can't tell; you and I don't know what happened in those days.'

'How do you mean, we don't know, Yegor Yakovlevich?' the major protested, looking round at me. 'Everyone knows that Leonardo da Vinci

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was a painter, a sculptor, an inventor and a writer as well. Ask our friend here.'

I was obliged to confirm what the major said.

'Well, if he was, he was,' the old man snapped, now that he was cornered. 'But *when* was he? Centuries ago. When everyone was a jack of all trades.'

'Is that one at me?'

'No, I'm speaking in general. Things have a different development these days, different machines, everything's different, my lad.'

I was quite amazed at Yegor Yakovlevich's historical approach to the problem. Saying so aloud, I interrupted the argument and invited them to have a snack.

At table, Yegor Yakovlevich flatly refused to drink.

'Later on, when we light her up. . . . You have one, though,' he told the major, 'it won't do you any harm.'

'Won't you have a drop too?'

'No, I can't. Not at work. I've got no one to do my thinking for me.'

The major didn't insist, nor did he take offence.

'Well, I'll have a glass. Good health to you!'

The major and I had a drink. Our conversation turned again to literature. We touched on Mayakovsky, of whom the major spoke with adoration, quoting him by heart with such enthusiasm that he even forgot to cover his smile with his hand. And

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I wondered why a man with such a love for Mayakovsky should write such neat, tidy verses, imitating everything under the sun except his idol. But I didn't ask him about it, merely remarking that when I studied Mayakovsky with my pupils I often came across words and turns of phrase that broke all the rules of our native tongue. The major protested hotly. Half-annoyed, half-joking, he called me a conservative and dogmatist.

Yegor Yakovlevich ate listlessly, sipped his tea and maintained a proud and remote silence. If I haven't heard anything about all this and don't know anything about it (his whole appearance, his grunting and coughing, seemed to say) it's only because I've no use for it, it doesn't interest me and it's probably just a lot of nonsense anyhow. But when we mentioned Pushkin, he said :

'Pushkin was a great Russian poet.' He said it as if he alone knew it, as if he had reached this conclusion by his own intellect and was the first man in the world to make the discovery. 'A great poet !' He sighed, then screwing up his eyes, he too recited, with exaggerated expression :

'Our Moscow, burning and forsaken,
By the invading Frenchmen taken —
Old warrior, say, was that in vain ?'

'But that's Lermontov,' the major laughed. The old man merely glanced sideways at him and continued :

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‘Well, all those fights were bitter fought,
They tell me. And it’s not for naught’ —

‘But that’s Lermontov’s *Borodino*!’ The major interrupted him with cheerful indignation, and nudged me with his elbow.

‘That, in the Russian heart and thought,
Great Borodino lives again!’

Yegor Yakovlevich pronounced the final words loudly and emphatically. He even jerked his finger at the major, as if to show him that he had known what the poem was all the time. Then he went on, determined not to be interrupted —

‘And *The Battle of Poltava*: “Glows the East with a new dawn. . . .”’

‘Yes, that’s Pushkin, you’re right there,’ the major persisted. ‘Only it’s part of a long poem called *Poltava*. But it’s Pushkin, all right.’

‘Did I say it wasn’t Pushkin? Who else could have written a poem like that? Your Mayakovsky? Not likely, my lad.’

‘Mayakovsky’s dead now. No one knows what other poems he might have written.’

‘Pah!’ The old man waved his heavy hand with the greatest possible scepticism. ‘Pah!’

‘Well, you are a tough nut, Yegor Yakovlevich!’ The major shook his head in perplexity, lifting the wrinkles on his forehead to the very roots of his thick black hair. ‘A real tough nut.’

Although the old man plainly enjoyed hearing

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himself so described, he made it clear at once that this was no news to him.

‘Well, I’m past seventy, thank the Lord. When you’ve lived as long as I have, then you’ll be able to talk.’ This referred not only to the major but to me and the whole of our generation.

Yet even now the major could not resist a moment of triumph.

‘You may be a tough nut, but *Borodino* was written by Lermontov.’

Yegor Yakovlevich said nothing and, having thanked me for the meal, rose from the table noticeably depressed. I think he himself knew he had made a blunder over *Borodino*, but to admit it would have been as sharp a prick as admitting that he had never heard of Leonardo da Vinci. I was sorry for him, as one is always sorry for an old man who suffers defeat at the hands of those who have the advantage of education and a youthful memory.

After breakfast the work went ahead even faster. Both stovemakers started laying the bricks: Yegor Yakovlevich on the kitchen side, the major in the back room, with me as their assistant. But the work proceeded in silence, save for a few remarks strictly concerning the job. Perhaps this was due to their recent argument, in which the major had obviously come off best, but it may have been because the work itself was becoming more and more intricate, now that various dampers, flues and

vents had to be fixed and the range had to be connected up with the main flue — a task needing particular concentration.

I did not try to draw the stovemakers out of their silence, for I had my work cut out to keep both of them supplied with bricks and clay. When they took a rest, I made haste to prepare and arrange things so that I could manage more easily. The body of the new stove had by this time risen to the hole in the ceiling, where the old stack was propped up ; smaller than its predecessor, it looked rather smart and unusual. The heating surfaces of the stove and the 'mirror', its wall facing into the other room, were all one brick thick. When Yegor Yakovlevich began making a kind of cornice for it under the ceiling, the stove became even more handsome. I could already picture it whitewashed ; it would be quite an adornment to the room when I had tidied up and arranged everything for Lolya's arrival. But would it heat properly ?

For the work at the top some sort of ladder was required, so we used stools and even the table, covering the latter with newspapers as best we could. Only Yegor Yakovlevich worked at the top ; now, indeed, he was king of the castle.

When we needed some bricks of a certain shape for the cornice, he told the major to shape them for him. The major spoiled one brick, then another. Looking very hot and uncomfortable, he tried a third, but that, too, split into three pieces. I was

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expecting impatience and sarcastic remarks from Yegor Yakovlevich, but he seemed quite sympathetic over the failure of his assistant.

‘It’s rubbishy brick. Call this brick? Here, let me have it.’

He took the brick deftly in his left hand, which was still ‘in the dry,’ tossed it on his palm and with a light tap of the hammer, like cracking an egg-shell, split it into just the shape he wanted. He did as well with the second brick, and the third, and all the bricks he needed, except that sometimes it took him one or two extra taps to produce the required result.

‘That’s the way to do it!’ said the major. ‘That’s the way, by Jove it is!’

But the old stovemaker wished to be magnanimous. He attributed the enviable accuracy of his blows to the fact that the bricks were of different quality.

‘Some of them are not so bad.’ All the same he could not resist a sly remark, ‘Fancy having quite a run of good ones all at once. . . .’

The major and I burst out laughing. Yegor Yakovlevich laughed, too, and I saw that he was more than compensated for his defeat in the other sphere. We both kept him supplied and were quite lost in admiration at the way he put in one brick after another under the old stack until the props could be knocked out; and when they were, nothing terrible happened; everything fitted like

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a glove, although Yegor Yakovlevich had not once used a square or ruler.

It was dusk by the time he climbed down, grunting, from his perch and the great moment of trying out the new stove arrived. I wanted to switch on the light but he protested.

'No need for it. Shan't we be able to see by the firelight?'

He settled himself in front of the stove, this time on his knees instead of his haunches, sitting on the heels of his huge felt boots, as peasants usually sit in a sledge, or round a fire or common pot on the ground. Having arranged some shavings on the still damp grating, he struck a match, but did not apply it to them at once; instead he lit a ball of paper and pushed it into the ash-box underneath, and only then put the curling, almost burnt-out match into the shavings. The paper burnt up quickly in the ash-box, the fire in the stove was slow to start — I scarcely breathed as I watched it — but in the end it caught. In dead silence the three of us watched it. Now it was blazing up, merrily licking at the bigger chips. Yes, but it had been like that with the old stove too, at this stage — what would happen now? Yegor Yakovlevich began putting on wood, arranging it as Ivanovna did; gradually the fire gained a firm hold on the logs; and so it went on, better and better. Yegor Yakovlevich rose heavily from his knees.

'Well, congratulations on your new stove,' he

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said and began washing his hands in the pail.

So that was why he had not let me switch on the light — to make the fire look better in the stove. Yegor Yakovlevich was a poet in his trade.

When the major and I had washed and changed, I brought up, with some misgivings, the question of what fee Yegor Yakovlevich expected. 'Everybody knows how much I charge.' I remembered his words, but I was worried about whether I had enough ready cash to settle up on the spot. The stove was burning splendidly, the big logs had been put on, they too had caught, and everything was going so well that I forgot to run out to see if the smoke was coming out of the chimney. It must be, if the stove wasn't smoking in the room.

'Oh, never mind that.' Yegor Yakovlevich seemed to brush the question aside. 'Never mind.'

'No, no, Yegor Yakovlevich, please tell me what I owe you.'

'The same as him, fifty-fifty,' he replied in the same half-serious, half-joking manner, indicating the major. 'We worked together. And you ought to get your share too : you helped us.'

'Yegor Yakovlevich,' the major intervened, 'I'm here on quite a different basis, I'm not entitled to anything. I said in advance I wouldn't take anything, as I'm not an expert.'

'And I won't take anything because I *am* an expert. See ? So there's no more to say ! But if

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you want to have a drink in honour of the new stove, I won't refuse now.'

I tried to insist that the payment would be no burden to me, and that most of it would be met by the school, but at this Yegor Yakovlevich cut in sternly and touchily.

'You're on the wrong track there. As if I would take money from our school ! I'm not as hard up as all that, thank the Lord, I'm not going to allow that kind of thing !'

Perhaps this touchiness of his sprang from the fact that the major had again stolen a march on him by refusing payment in advance ; in any case I had to drop the subject.

The major heard all this. When we sat down at the table, he gazed at Yegor Yakovlevich with an amused yet embarrassed look, and finally asked him :

'Yegor Yakovlevich, are you cross with me about something ?' The question was unusual. 'Perhaps I've done something to offend you ?'

'No. Why do you ask ?' the old man said in surprise, and, as though he had never seen the major before, stared at his tunic with its insignia of rank and treble row of medal ribbons.

'Why should I be ? We did a good job together. I can't see what we've got to quarrel about.'

Yegor Yakovlevich was now addressing the major formally ; evidently he considered him no longer a subordinate, as he had done while the work was in progress.

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‘All right, then. You’re a good man, Yegor Yakovlevich, not to mention your skill at your trade. Let’s have a drink — here’s to you !’

‘And the same to you !’ They clinked glasses as though there had, after all, been something between them, and now they were both glad to be reconciled.

At that point Ivanovna knocked at the door. She had seen the smoke coming out of the chimney. Fyodor limped in after her. They both drank with us, then praised the stove and praised Yegor Yakovlevich openly. He drank three glasses, grew red in the face, and started boasting that he could build not only ordinary Russian and Dutch stoves, but Swedish stoves, and a round *burak*, and a fireplace, and a steam-heating boiler : and that no one else could do it as well, because he had the talent for it, and talent was a rare thing. Perhaps he became a little boring and a bit too noisy, but when I wanted to pour him another vodka he covered the glass firmly with his hand — ‘Had my ration !’ — and began to take his leave.

I volunteered to see him home, not only because he was obviously a little tipsy, but because I was still hoping to be able to get him to agree about some sort of payment. But he thanked me ceremoniously and said good-bye.

‘See me home ? I’m not a girl.’

‘Well, he is a tough nut, I must say !’ said the major when he had gone.

We sat on together for a while talking. Ivan-

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ovna brought in some fresh wood for the next day and started tidying the room. The stove began to dry out. It even heated the room a little. I felt so contented that it seemed to me I should never run into any more trouble, all the days of my life.